The story of the golden calf in Exod 32 is enormously complex and complicated both literarily and theologically. The larger story block of Exod 32–34 interrupts the narrative flow of the book of Exodus. The preceding chapters (Exod 25–31) contain the LORD’s instructions for the building of the Tabernacle. Chapters 35–40 describe the construction of the holy place, reaching a climax and conclusion when the glory of the LORD descends upon it (40:34-38). Thus, the golden calf episode disrupts the natural progression between divine command and human response. The digression produces a subplot that requires its own resolution. What happens when the people transgress the covenant? Exod 32 raises important and difficult theological issues about how God is present within the context of sin and judgment. The LORD and God’s servant, Moses, prove to be both merciful and severe in response to the people’s apostasy. The covenant is renewed (Exod 34) but not without consequence.

Israel’s Transgression

Because of the complex literary development of this text, scholars have argued over the nature of Israel’s transgression in this passage. Why, for example, do the Israelites ask for gods, but Aaron produces only one calf? Moreover, the calf is not representative of some other deity like Baal in this passage; it is worshiped as the LORD on a festival of the LORD (32:4-5). Regardless of these complexities, the canonical text is clear that the people, with the aid of Aaron, violate the prohibition against idolatry (Exod 20:4-6). This interpretation of the event is contained within the memory of Israel’s tradition (Ps 106:19-20, cf. 1 Kgs 12:28-30). Thus, within the present literary context, the incident of the golden calf points to the people’s tendency to fall quickly into apostasy. Moses has not even descended to the people with the covenantal tablets before the Israelites have digressed into idolatry. Aaron’s leadership has failed, as he acquiesces to the people’s demands. In addition, the people’s conduct has degenerated into sexual revelry (32:6). Even in the midst of Israel’s defining revelatory moment, the covenant is positioned precariously between God’s awesome holiness and the people’s infidelity.

Moses as Mediator—Intercessor

Throughout this passage, Moses’ mediatorial role is balanced with both his passionate intercession and severe judgment. When the LORD threatens to destroy the people because of their rebellion, Moses intervenes. In vv. 7-10, God informs Moses about the people’s quick decline into idolatry. The LORD creates distance from the people by aligning them with Moses, calling the Israelites “your people.” In his response, Moses redirects the ownership of Israel back to God by asking: “Why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand?” (32:11, emphasis mine). Moses’ intercession in these verses puts responsibility for the welfare of Israel back in God’s hands. Moreover, he provides the LORD with two reasons to show mercy rather than wrath.

The first has to do with God’s honor and reputation. Moses suggests that the Egyptians will question...
why the LORD brought the Israelites out of Egypt only to kill them in the wilderness (v. 12). Because of this, Israel’s mediator implores God to have mercy and change God’s mind about bringing disaster on the people. Moses’ second reason is based in the LORD’s promises made to the ancestors—to multiply their descendents and bring them to the good land (v. 13). Thus, Moses reminds God of the divine obligation to Israel’s forbearers. This intercessory act compels God to change his mind in v. 14 (literally, “the LORD repented of the evil/disaster”). Hence, Moses’ daring and passionate intervention on behalf of the people persuades the LORD against destroying them in anger.

Moses as Mediator—Judgment

Despite Moses’ faithful intercession on behalf of Israel, he is furious with the people upon his descent from the mountain. He smashes the two tablets as a visible sign that the covenant has been broken (v. 19). After he destroys the golden calf, he questions Aaron about the incident. Aaron’s response emphasizes the sin of the people and minimizes his own role, claiming that a calf simply came forth from the fire (v. 24). In this way, the narrator contrasts the two leaders, Aaron and Moses. Moses had daringly interceded on behalf of Israel, standing between the people and the LORD’s wrath. Aaron blames the people for the incident, making himself an unwitting bystander to the event. Seeing that the people have gone wild, Moses asks for volunteers who are “on the LORD’s side” (v. 26). The Levites respond, and Moses commands them to kill brother, friend, and neighbor in order to preserve order. Three thousand Israelites fall by the sword. Most shockingly, Moses proclaims that these actions brought a blessing upon the Levites. While originally this legend about the sons of Levi probably served to validate this order of priests, within the canonical context of this passage their actions represent a murderous response to the apostasy of the people. The sin of murder (Exod 20:13) is utilized to extinguish the sin of idolatry. Moses’ severe response to the situation points to the reality of judgment among the people. Israel’s leader resorts to the use of force in order to restore social order. The executions also point to the consequences of rebellion and apostasy. There is no tidy way for God and his servant to deal with the chaos created by the people’s sin. Thus, Moses’ course of action represents the sobering reality of taking the people’s transgression seriously. Breaking the covenant is an issue of life and death.

After order is restored, Moses again intercedes on behalf of Israel (vv. 31-32). He, unlike Aaron, aligns himself with the fate of the people, asking God to blot out his name from God’s book if the deity is unwilling to forgive the people. In this way, Moses’ severe judgment in v. 25-29 is buffered on both sides of the story with the mediator’s intercession on behalf of the people. The LORD replies by stating to Moses that those who were responsible will be held accountable (v. 33). In addition, the LORD sends a plague on the people because of the golden calf incident. Hence, God’s actions and words represent both compassion and judgment, similar to the character of Moses. God shows mercy by not destroying the Israelites. Nevertheless, the LORD also looks upon the breaking of the covenant with grave seriousness. Israel’s actions have damaging consequences for their well-being. The plague confirms this fact. In the end, however, God’s severe judgment is not the final word in the subplot of Exod 32–34. After yet another intercession by Moses (33:12-16), the tablets are rewritten and the covenant is renewed in 34:10-28 (also known as the Ritual Decalogue because of its emphasis on cultic practices). As it would later be for Israel in exile, so it is for them in the narrative at Sinai. Their sin has brought about God’s judgment. The LORD, however, remains faithful to the people by renewing the terms of the covenant (cf. Jer 31:31-34), so that God’s grace and compassion, and not the people’s sin, would have the last word.

Questions

1. At the heart of the second commandment is the freedom of God from static human representations. What are some of the ways that religious traditions constrain God’s freedom within their own practices and beliefs?

2. Does our worship vocabulary, for example the persistence of malecentered images of God, represent a form of idolatrous language about God? Why or why not?
3. Religious symbols and iconography can be powerful worship aids for communities of faith. They are visible representations of holy realities. How does this practice differ from idolatry? Explain.

4. The idea of God’s judgment is not easy for contemporary readers of the Bible. How can we translate this important and yet difficult idea into our present context?

5. Contrast the models of leadership provided by the characters of Moses and Aaron. What distinguishes the two of them as effective or ineffective?

6. The violence in Exod 32:25-29 is problematic. Talk about the dangers and dynamics of religiously motivated violence. How can we resist such ideas theologically? How can we faithfully resist the violence within this text as interpreters?